IN THE CLAIMS:

1. (Currently Amended) Apparatus for protecting a composite-body aircraft against damage from lightning strikes comprising:

an aircraft body including a plurality of composite panels; and

a plurality of electrically conductive splice plates configured to join one of the plurality of composite panels to an adjacent other one of the plurality of composite panels at their respective edges,

the plurality of electrically conductive splice plates directly electrically coupled to adjacent ones of the plurality of electrically conductive splice plates to form a continuous, electrically conductive grid disposed on the exterior surface of the aircraft body.

2. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the continuous, electrically conductive grid extends to the outermost lateral periphery of the aircraft body.

3. (Canceled)

4. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein adjacent ends of the electrically conductive splice plates e electrically coupled to each other by electrically conductive fasteners extending through adjacent ends of the splice plates and an electrically conductive strap extending between the adjacent ends thereof.

5. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the electrically conductive splice plates comprise titanium.

6. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the aircraft body comprises a blended-wing-body ("BWB") aircraft.

7. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the plurality of composite panels comprise graphite fibers.

8. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the aircraft body includes an electrical system, and wherein the electrically conductive grid comprises a ground return path of the electrical system.

9. (Currently Amended) A method for protecting a composite-body aircraft against damage from lightning strikes comprising:

providing an aircraft body including a plurality of composite panels;

coupling each one of the plurality of composite panels to an adjacent other one of the plurality of composite panels using a plurality of electrically conductive splice plates; and

directly electrically coupling adjacent ends of the conductive splice plates to each other to form a continuous, electrically conductive grid on the exterior surface of the aircraft body.

10. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein the continuous, electrically conductive grid extends to the outermost lateral periphery of the exterior surface of the aircraft body.

11. (Canceled)

12. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein electrically coupling adjacent ends of the conductive splice plates to each other comprises:

coupling an electrically conductive bonding strap to adjacent ends of the splice plates; and,

extending electrically conductive fasteners through the adjacent ends and the bonding strap.

13. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein the electrically conductive splice plates comprise titanium.

14. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein the aircraft body comprises a blended-wing-body ("BWB") aircraft.

15. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein the plurality of composite panels comprise graphite fibers.

16. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein the aircraft body includes an electrical system, and wherein the electrically conductive grid comprises a ground return path of the electrical system.

17. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein the plurality of composite panels comprise a plurality of polygonal composite panels.